





# CLIMBING ALABAMA

Alabama is well known for world class fishing and hunting. What many may not know, however, is about the state's fantastic rock climbing opportunities. Visitors from around the country – and even the world – visit the state every year to climb Alabama. Rock climbing is truly one of Alabama's best-kept secrets.

By Dr. Eric Beck

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Starting at Fort Payne in the northeast corner of the state, climbing venues extend all the way to Birmingham. This covers a large portion of the state. Fortunately, this line of climbing opportunities conveniently follows Interstate 59. This means that you can start a climbing road trip at Little River Canyon in Fort Payne and finish at Moss Rock Preserve in Hoover, just south of Birmingham, with many great stops along the way. So rack up, get in the car, and let's go climb Alabama!



BARBARA WOOD

## Little River Canyon

The first stop on our road trip is beautiful Little River Canyon. To get to the canyon from Birmingham, follow I-59 north 92.4 miles. Take exit 218 for AL-35 toward Rainsville/Fort Payne 0.3 miles. Turn right at AL-35/Glenn Blvd SW 1.1 miles.

Turn left at AL-35/Gault Ave S/US-11/Veterans Memorial Pkwy. and go 0.6 miles. Turn right at 3rd St SE and travel 0.4 miles. Continue on Adamsburg Ave. for 0.2 miles. Take a slight right at CR-78/Mountain Rd. SE. Continue to follow County Road 78 for another 5.4 miles. Turn right at County Road 255.

Little River is the deepest canyon east of the Mississippi River. Even if you don't climb, you'll enjoy Little River Canyon for its scenic beauty. In addition to climbing, the Little River Canyon features intense white water during the rainy seasons so it is a favorite of kayakers and paddlers.

On my recent trip to the canyon, there were plenty of leaf peekers and visitors but no climbers. A stop at the local climbing shop helped to explain why. I learned that climbing in the canyon often requires access through private land, but more importantly, the climbing routes in the canyon are extremely difficult (at least for me). This means if you are not up to grade 5.11 climbing or above (and if you don't know what that means—trust me, you're not up to it) you may want to pass this up for the next stop on our trip, Sand Rock. Not to worry; many of the climbers I ran in to further down the road had great things to say about Jamestown, a newly opened route

on the north end of the canyon. Check out the Southeastern Rock Climbing Coalition's recommendations on access to the climb at [www.seclimbers.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=27](http://www.seclimbers.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=27).

## Sand Rock (Cherokee Rock Village)

To get to Sand Rock head back to I-59. Go south on I-59 to exit 205 at Collinsville about 15 miles. Exit onto Hwy. 11 south to Hwy. 68. Go east on Hwy. 68 for 7 miles to County Road 36 for Cherokee Rock Village. Go 1.4 miles and turn left at the sign for Cherokee Rock Village Rock. Follow this up the mountain and stop when the road runs out. You will see the climbers.

Climbing at Sand Rock is almost all bolted sport routes. The rock is sandstone as is most climbing in Alabama. The sand stone is fairly firm, but for the rare trad climbers here check it out first. The consistency varies and can be soft in places. For the sport, just bring harness, rope, stick clips and quick draws and you will be set. There is abundant free, but primitive, camping around the site. Get there early to stake out your place, as this is a popular site. This is a busy spot but great for beginner to intermediate climbers.

## Horse Pens Forty

To get to Horse Pens Forty, head back to I-59 at Collinsville and go south. Take exit 166 forty-three miles south. Turn north onto U.S. 231. Travel 3 miles to a Horse Pens 40 sign. Turn right onto County Road 35. Go about one mile to another Horse Pens 40 sign. Turn right onto County Road 42. Follow this to the top of the mountain. A split rail fence marks the entrance.

Horse Pens Forty refers to 40 acres of rock formations that were once used as horse pens. This is a fascinating area that



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has been inhabited by Native Americans, outlaws, and most recently the Schultz family. Mike Schultz, proprietor and historian for the site, was kind enough to give me an extensive tour of the area. The Horse Pens boasts unique rock formations, rare plant species and climbers.

No rack, no rope—no problem here! Technical climbing is not allowed; only bouldering is permitted. The bouldering is so extraordinary that it attracts world class climbers and competitions. On my recent trip to the Horse Pens, Kate Reese, winner of the Triple Crown Bouldering Series, strolled by. James Sherman, who pioneered the V ("Sherman the Vermin") rating system for bouldering was also on site.

Camping is available for a minimal fee. Mike's wife dishes up classic southern cooking (think fried green tomatoes) at reasonable prices in their restaurant. If you do climb, either bring a crash pad or rent one at their on site pro-shop. You cannot climb without one. Mike is very passionate about the history and preservation of this wonderful place. He requests that people treat the rock, flora and fauna with respect. In other words, leave things just like you found them.

## Palisades Park

Palisades Park is just around the corner from Horse Pens Forty. Go back to Hwy. 231 and go north to Oneonta about 16 miles. Continue through Oneonta on Highway 231 north about one mile. Follow the signs to the park.

In contrast to Sand Rock there are no bolted routes here nor are any allowed. There are many fantastic single pitch trad routes available. On my visit to Palisades all the climbers were top roping, a technique in which the rope runs from the belayer at the foot of the route through one or more carabiners connected to an anchor at the top of the route and back down to the climber. The crowds were sparse compared to Sand Rock and things were more laid back. Beautiful views are available from the park with minimal approach time to the crags.

The rock face is south so in sunny Alabama you can climb here year round. This is a beautiful spot. You must get a day permit from the park manager to climb at Palisades. No bolting or camping are allowed. There have been issues with accidents in the past and climbing at the site is tenuous. Please be respectful of the site and climb safe. This is a fantastic place, which may not be available in the future if people do not take care of it.

## Moss Rocks Preserve

Want to climb some more? Let's cruise down to Moss Rock Preserve, climbing refuge for the Birmingham urbanite. Go back south on Hwy. 231 through Oneonta to I-59. Take I-59 south and then take exit 459 south to Hoover, AL. This is about 50 miles from the Asheville exit. Continue through Hoover and take exit 13 for road 31. Go north and after three traffic lights turn left on Patton Chapel Rd. South. Go 1.5 miles and turn left on Chapel Lane.

Turn right after ½ mile on Al Seier Rd. Go another 1.5 miles and park on the left at the baseball field. Head to the trail across the road and follow it.

This is another great bouldering site, so leave your rack in the car. There are plenty of routes here.


## Summary

If you're not experienced, climbing instruction is available in Alabama. To find locations, search for climbing instruction at [www.touralabama.org](http://www.touralabama.org). You can also contact the Southeastern Climbers Coalition at [www.seclimbers.org](http://www.seclimbers.org) for information regarding climbing and instruction in your area.

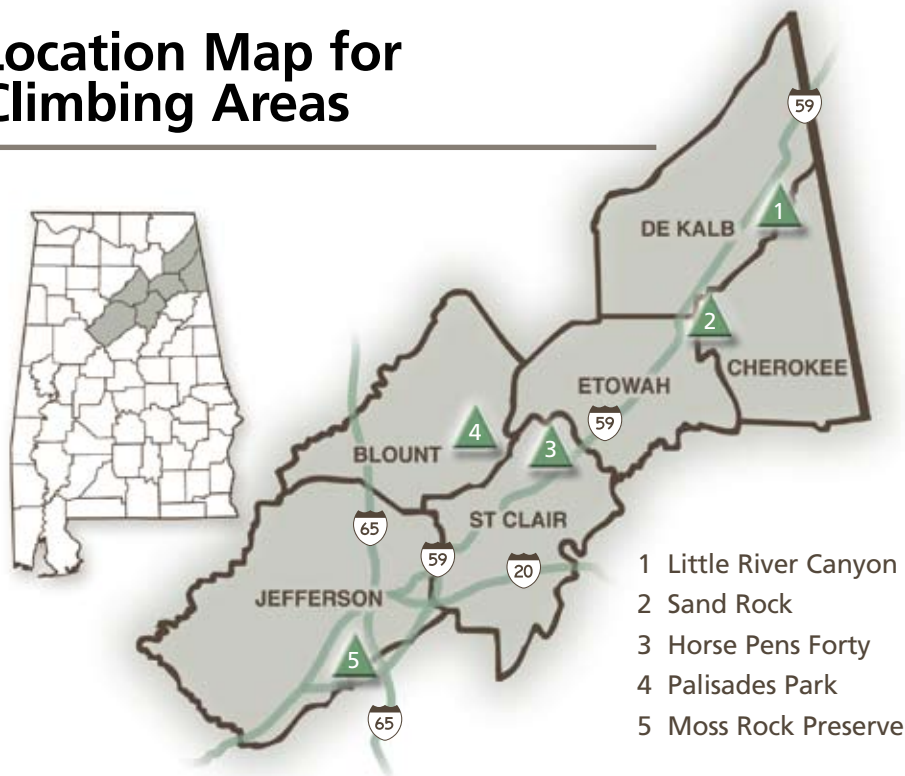
Even if you may have climbing experience, we all get rusty. A lack of recent experience can lead to possible injury or even death. Therefore, if you have any doubt get checked out!

Our road trip is over but if climbing is your game, you can play in Alabama. The state's temperate climate allows climbing throughout the year. Whether you like bouldering, sport climbing or traditional climbing, you can find it all in Alabama.

## For More Information

Dr. Eric Beck is a physician who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation. If you have questions about climbing, please e-mail him at [drbeck@becks-world.net](mailto:drbeck@becks-world.net). You can also post a message about climbing in Alabama on his blog at [www.becks-world.net](http://www.becks-world.net). 

## Location Map for Climbing Areas



## Climbing Lingo

**Rock climbing:** Ascending rock formations, often using climbing shoes and a chalk bag. Equipment such as ropes, bolts, nuts, hexes and camming devices are normally employed, either as a safeguard or for artificial aid.

**Bouldering:** Ascending boulders or small outcrops, often with climbing shoes and a chalk bag or bucket. Usually, instead of using a safety rope from above, injury is avoided using a crash pad (a combination of high and low density foam, within a heavy duty fabric structure, often transported on the back) and a human spotter (to direct a falling climber on to the pad).

- **Sport (climbing)** – Climbing on rock that has permanent bolts pre-placed in the rock for safety.
- **Trad (traditional) climbing** – Rock that has no bolts and so requires the placement of temporary protection (pro) to keep the climber safe.
- **Pro (protection)** – Temporary devices such as cams, nuts and slings to secure the climber.
- **Rack** – The collection of your climbing gear (pro) needed for the climb.
- **Bolts** – Permanent fixtures in the rock to clip your protection into.

## Climbing Safety

- Never re-use a carabiner that has been dropped. Even though it looks good, micro fractures in the carabiner can lead to disaster in a fall.
- Always wear a helmet—you only have one brain so take care of it!
- If you are new to climbing, get with an experienced guide or friend before heading out. Inexperience can lead to death or significant injury.
- Change out your ropes according to the manufacturer's recommendations.